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ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues informally discussed and then delineated by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this 13th annual report. The commissions and their directors are: (1) Commission on Curriculum (Dorothy King); (2) Commission on Composition (Christine Kline); (3) Commission on Language (Roseann Duenas Gonzalez); (4) Commission on Literature (Carol Jago); (5) Commission on Reading (Diane Stephens); and (6) Commission on Media (Lawrence B. Fuller). Some of the subjects discussed in the report include: assessment issues in writing; the possibilities and constraints of technology (particularly the Internet) in the field of composition; the teaching of writing in both teacher preparation programs and graduate programs for returning teachers; an emerging tension between teaching skills in isolation and integrating language arts skills; the manipulation of curriculum by groups promoting their own economic or ideological concerns; conservative political discourses dominated by a language of exclusion; efforts of English Language Arts teachers to discuss issues of equity and social justice among all students; the growing use of multicultural literature in classrooms at every level; the "manufactured crisis" in reading; the Standards for the English Language Arts document; efforts to include media literacy standards in curriculum guidelines; reduced funding for institutions (such as public broadcasting) which have produced some of the better instructional materials dealing with media education; and the growing confusion among educators about how media literacy differs from mastery of technologies that have applications to traditional reading and writing pedagogies. (RS)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1996–SIX SUMMARIES

Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

compiled by Charles Suhor, NCTE

ED 395 331

During their meetings at the recent convention, the six NCTE commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas below do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the thirteenth annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

The Commission on Composition (Christine Kline, Director) acknowledges that major attention must be paid to understanding both the possibilities and the constraints of technology in the field of composition. In the age of Internet, what are the emerging definitions of authorship? Of authority? What are the possibilities of such access to information? What are the limits? Where do primary influences in the field reside? Who has access to computer technology? What are the equity issues? In what ways are composing processes and modes of discourse changing in an increasingly technological world? The Commission will be directing attention to these issues in upcoming convention sessions and will be seeking collaborative enterprises with other NCTE bodies concerned with these matters.

Assessment in writing continues to be a major concern of the Commission. We are concerned that high-stakes portfolio assessment may override the instructional, reflective uses of portfolios in classrooms. The value of portfolios remains in the multiple glimpses of writing it affords students and teachers and in the reflection and learning from that deliberative look. The writing and selection of pieces for reflection and growth should arise out of student and classroom issues. We are also concerned about the emphasis on writing prompts in district-wide and state-wide testing programs. The a-contextual prompts, in the absence of ongoing staff development in districts, may comprise a primary mode of writing in classrooms. Such writing does not serve skillful and wide writing growth.

The link between imposed assessment and instructional change is a continuing cause for concern. Assessment should derive from and be congruent with our best knowledge about writing, learning and the nature of school change. Too often the nature of change is overlooked in the consideration of effective, theory-driven practice. A single, narrow effort to drive change, as with imposed assessment, is insufficient. Major attention must be paid to substantial, ongoing staff development at all school levels. Teachers still struggle to persuade school communities of the very legitimacy of collaboratively-developed, multi-tiered staff development as the critical component in the growth of learning and teaching.

The Commission again expresses concern about the teaching of writing in both teacher preparation programs and graduate programs for returning teachers. How much attention is actually being paid to the teaching of writing? Is it equal to the attention given to reading?

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Are there specific program requirements for coursework in the teaching of writing? If writing is presented as a component of language arts courses, how large is the focus? Who in teacher preparation programs is actually teaching writing methodology? Are they themselves highly informed about the field? This concern is part of the ongoing, larger concern of this commission about the continued subordination of writing to literature in secondary schools and colleges and of writing to reading in the elementary schools. We are deeply concerned that teacher preparation programs may still reflect this unequal attention to what should be the equal and intertwined activities of literacy. The concern extends to the lack of attention to the other major language process that helps us, as James Moffett states, "compose the world,"--the language process of talk.

The Commission on Curriculum (Dorothy King, Director) applauds the development of comprehensive standards that are responsive to, and generated by, the learning community. The Commission recognizes continuing positive trends such as teachers using information gained from research, including research from their own classrooms; teachers and members of the community becoming involved in the curriculum process; implementing curriculum and methodologies that accommodate pluralism, learning styles, and interactive technologies, and using quality literature at all levels that represents gender and cultural diversity. Other positive trends are the use of authentic assessment embedded in curriculum and the expansion of literacy to encompass the rich, oral traditions of culturally diverse families.

The Commission believes that language and curriculum are powerful. Using language can empower the user. Curriculum can enable that empowerment. The Commission recognizes that providing opportunities for such empowerment is in itself a political activity and that the politics of curriculum, therefore, should be raised to a more conscious level. A broad-based multi-voiced curriculum can liberate the learner. Such a curriculum fosters tolerant, respectful, and inquiring citizens who celebrate their own rights and responsibilities and who value and respect the rights and responsibilities of others.

The Commission believes that every student deserves a quality education. The curriculum should reflect high standards of performance from each student, providing equal opportunities for rigorous learning and achievement. It should avoid programs of study and standards which privilege one group of students over others. The curriculum should offer all students access to the fullest development of personal, economic, and societal potential.

The Commission recognizes an emerging tension between teaching skills in isolation and integrating language arts skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing). Inevitably students construct their own knowledge. Though standards must be described as if each is a discrete outcome, the Commission opposes teaching and assessment which promote fragmentation in language arts skills.

The Commission notes that because early adolescence represents a period of increased risk, many middle-school students become lost to schooling, losing the enthusiasm of their early years. This phenomenon occurs across demographic categories. The Commission urges all educators, particularly those in the English language arts, to be especially sensitive to matters that may occupy the hearts and minds of middle-school aged students, such as their own physical maturation processes, new social pressures brought on by their emerging

adolescence the lack of cultural and ethnic inclusion in the curriculum.

The Commission strongly condemns the manipulation of curriculum by groups promoting their own economic or ideological interests. It notes that business-school partnerships, if not guided by principles defined to ensure the integrity of the curriculum, can result in subtle transformations of curriculum into propaganda. Equipment provided to schools may insinuate advertising into teaching; texts supplied may masquerade as factual while presenting incomplete or inaccurate information promoting business interests. Groups committed to ideological stances that militate against free inquiry in the classroom undermine the fundamental goal of producing students for a democracy. They may engage in censorship, denying students the opportunity to read controversial texts or outlawing writers whose positions differ from those of the group. They may demand agreement with their thinking or submission to the absolute authority of a particular text, individual, or institution. The Commission further opposes the mandating of curriculum by State legislatures, dictating methods and strategies that may well be in direct conflict, not only with what the last 25 years of experience and research have told us about best practice in the teaching of language and literature, but also with the democratic principles these elected officials are charged with defending.

The Commission endorses the notion of curriculum and staff development as ongoing, a fundamental necessity. Although we expect individual teachers to assume responsibility for their own professional growth, schools and district must provide scheduled times, resources, and incentives in support of those efforts. Revision is not just for writing; it is for teaching. As teachers meet new and increasing challenges, the need to make staff development a priority grows. School districts must accept the responsibility of providing time and resources for teachers to think through growing concerns such as: how to prioritize the ever growing demands of curriculum; how to create curriculum that supports the standards document; how to manage mobile student populations; and how to meet the needs of students who speak languages other than English.

The Commission on Language (Roseann Duenas Gonzalez, Director) identified a number of trends and issues at its meeting in San Diego. First of all, the Commission noted the continuing trend for conservative political discourses to be dominated by a language of exclusion. The discourse of "common" sense, beliefs, values, and curriculum, for example, exacerbates the sense of US and THEM by positioning the values and beliefs of significant sectors of the US population outside the range of "common." The language of globalization achieves similar ends by effacing the social, cultural, economic, and linguistic diversity that exists within and between nations. Commission members also expressed their concern about the continuing efforts of neo-conservative politicians and pundits to silence the voices of non-dominant groups through a putatively democratic discourse of merit and choice. Ultimately, movements to establish charter schools, vouchers, and eliminate the certification of teachers must be seen as thinly-veiled efforts by cultural and economic elites to preserve their privilege at the expense of groups who have long suffered the effects of poverty and discrimination.

The members of the Commission on Language also expressed their concern about the degree to which our profession--and the organizations which serve teachers of English Language

Arts--reinforce racist practices by (relative) silence on issues such as racism in language and efforts to establish English as the official language in the United States. The Commission believed, for example, that NCTE should take a leadership role in opposing the "English Only" movements.

Finally, the Commission took some heart in the efforts of teachers of English Language Arts to use language arts instruction as a space for opening up discussions of issues of equity and social justice among elementary, secondary, and university students. The Commission restated its commitment to issues of equity and social justice and agreed to continue their efforts to encourage and support the work of teachers of English language arts to create a more just and democratic society enriched by the linguistic and cultural diversity of all our nation's citizens.

The Commission on Literature (Carol Jago, Director) sees a growing use of multicultural literature in classrooms at every level from picture books to college texts. We applaud the many teachers who have found the professional time to read a whole new body of literature and who have brought these works to students. Courage has sometimes been required to face opposition both from those who believe ethnic voices distract children from becoming American and from others who believe there is simply no more room in the canon.

We also commend publishers who have made inclusion of women and people of all ethnicities a priority as they develop texts for school. It is encouraging to see this diversity reflected both among the authors and in the characters depicted within the literature.

What is disconcerting to the Commission is to observe multicultural literature treated as peripheral to the important work of a course. It is not enough to sandwich a few Native American poems between a month-long study of *The Scarlet Letter* and six weeks on *Moby Dick*. The Commission recommends instead the use of paired texts. For example, Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* could be read alongside the traditionally taught *Huckleberry Finn*. Studying the two heroes' journeys and exploring similarities and differences would enrich the study of both texts. Other suggested pairings include Toni Morrison's *Jazz* with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby;* Richard Wright's memoir *Black Boy* with Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior;* J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* with Frank Chin's *Donald Duk* and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima;* Eric Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* with Larry Heinemann's Vietnam novel *Paco's Story;* and, of course, the much written about pairing of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

We urge teachers to consider carefully the order in which they use any paired works. The book studied first tends to become the standard against which the second is read. If the goal is to facilitate a dialogue among texts, teachers need to make sure that one voice does not always speak louder than the others. We also urge teachers to come together professionally at department meetings and conferences to discuss how multicultural literature can be brought to the center of the curriculum.

The Commission on Reading (Diane Stephens, Director) identified three major issues of concern. First, we are concerned about what Berliner calls "the manufactured crisis." There is a tremendous amount of press about what our schools and teachers are failing to do and about how standards have dropped over the past several years. The near-hysterical backlash against whole language in California is but one example. The Commission feels that NCTE should take whatever efforts necessary to help the public develop a more realistic understanding of what is happening with education at the current time. We are pleased, for example, to see a discussion of literacy rates included in the Standards for English Language Arts. The Commission will sponsor a session at 1996 NCTE Fall Conference to address this issue in the hopes that a more knowledgeable membership can help educate their colleagues and the more general public.

The Commission is also concerned about "quick" and often expensive "fixes" that the general public and legislators sometimes support. For example, unbiased research needs to be conducted on the effectiveness of Reading Recovery, and efforts should be made to help educators make informed decisions based on that research. The Commission would like to see information provided about how success ratios are determined. They want to understand who is and is not accepted into Reading Recovery. Are only the children most likely to be helped accepted? If so, the public might conclude that the program helps those most at risk when in contrast it might be targeting a different population. Are students who do not make progress dropped before they are even considered part of the enrollment count. a practice that would inflate success rates? Furthermore, the Commission is concerned about Reading Recovery students who are placed in classrooms which have a philosophy that is not consistent with Reading Recovery. Rumors abound about students being discontinued from Reading Recovery and then placed into Chapter One programs because they can not handle traditional reading groups tasks, e.g., worksheets and end-of-chapter questions. Last, the Commission is concerned about the actual cost of Reading Recovery and would like to see research which examines the "drop-out" rate of teachers who are Reading Recovery-trained.

The Commission hopes that research proposals on Reading Recovery receive support. The Commission would also like to see professional journals solicit research reports and opinion articles related to this topic.

Thirdly, and consistent with past years, the Commission remains concerned about the Standards for the English Language Arts document. Last year, the Commission was hopeful about the standards which NCTE had drafted. Now that IRA and NCTE have collaborated to produce a joint document, the Reading Commission feels that many of NCTE's positions have been compromised in order to produce such a document. The Commission hopes that NCTE will return to the visionary standards and form of the NCTE's Fall 1994 Content Standards Document.

The Commission on Media (Lawrence B. Fuller, Director) sees both encouraging and discouraging indicators about media literacy becoming a central focus of the K-12 English language arts curriculum. On the one hand, growing societal concern across the ideological spectrum about the negative immediate and long-term impacts on youth of various media representations has generated calls from national officials, community leaders, teachers, parents, and the general public to do something. Often, unfortunately, such concerns lead

mostly to efforts to censor media and to condemnation of media producers. On the other hand, means of doing something, namely making media literacy an integral part of the school curriculum, languish for lack of funds for teaching materials and equipment, a dearth of effective pre-service and in-service training of the teachers expected to instruct students, and confusion about where media literacy instruction should occur in the curriculum. NCTE itself often parallels the educational and political communities in failing to operate as though media literacy is an essential basic in English language arts instruction.

Thus, the Commission lauds efforts by states, professional organizations, and voluntary groups to include media literacy standards in guidelines for curriculum and teacher education, while decrying the reduced funding for such institutions as public broadcasting and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities which have produced some of the better instructional materials dealing with media education. The federal government's sale of more broadcast band width to commercial interests without raising funds for non-commercial broadcast media means that radio and television users have fewer alternatives to commercially dominated broadcasting and to programming and other representations that question commercial media practice. Reduced Endowment funding means fewer opportunities to produce films that break the Hollywood mold. Moreover, the ongoing legal and corporate restructuring of the telecommunications and publishing industries, especially as it leads to monopolistic practices and the curbing of critical voices, is a continuing source of concern. Young people need to know that there are other ways of viewing and representing human experience than Channel One and other commercial channels, tabloid newspapers, talk radio, and Hollywood films. Operations like C-Span are the exception.

Further muddying the situation is a bothersome but growing confusion among educators, including English teachers, about how media literacy differs from mastery of technologies that have applications to traditional reading and writing pedagogies. Media literacy refers to concepts best formulated by a 1993 Aspen Institute seminar. Its members, drawn from a wide range of media educators, agreed that "media are constructed, and construct reality; media have commercial implications; media have ideological and political implications; forms and content are related in each medium, each of which has a unique aesthetic, codes and conventions; [and] receivers negotiate meaning in media." These principles apply to the analysis and production of all media: written, oral, visual, and electronic. However, technological innovations based on the computer, which allow improved instruction in reading and writing, greater access to information, and interactive instruction, while not to be dismissed, do not address media educators' concerns about how all media, including print, represent human experience. Thus mastery of innovative technologies, though desirable, is not to be confused with media literacy.